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Foreign higher education institutes in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries

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Abstract

Gulf cooperation council (GCC) countries are witnessing an exponential growth in new foreign higher education institutions on account of government policies which promote setting up of local campuses of renowned foreign universities. But GCC countries have not been able to adequately address key quality related issues in higher education domain resulting into poor participation of local workforce in the private sector. This paper presents key issues in private higher education in GCC countries which need to be addressed on a priority basis by the local governments to help improve the quality of higher education.

Keywords

Gulf Cooperation Council, foreign education institutes, private higher education.

1. Introduction

In 1981 Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman and Kuwait formalised their regional cooperation by launching and becoming members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Besides other socio-economic objectives, promotion and advancement of education facilities and infrastructure was one of the main aims of GCC (Kirk and Napier 2008). Approximately three decades are over but till now GCC still has not been able to adequately address key issues in higher education domain and majority of professionally and technically qualified workers in the private sector continue to be foreign workers (Forstenlechner, 2008). In the last two decades development of higher education infrastructure has been primarily on account of setting up of numerous private higher education institutes in GCC countries. Universities and colleges funded by GCC governments have been unable to meet the demands of growing national as well as expatriate population. An immediate relook at a long-term higher education policy in GCC countries is imperative.

2. Growth of private higher education in GCC

The primary reason for dependence on expatriate workers is the insufficient / poor school and college output in GCC. Public universities in GCC need to improve a lot in terms of faculty, teaching methods and facilities (Coffman 2005). Nationals in GCC are weak in technical skills and do not generally apply for lower technical skills requiring jobs which offer lower salaries (Sturm et al. 2008). Around two third of local population in GCC falls in the age range of 14 to 27 years (Dollman 2007), which translates into a high number of school output ready to go in for higher / tertiary education. This guarantees an exponential increase in demand for higher educational institutes in GCC in near future. GCC has witnessed an exponential growth in private sector higher education institutions (Coffman, 2003) and the growth in the private sector has been assisted by the favourable policies implemented by governments in GCC which promote setting up of local campuses of renowned foreign universities (Mukerji and Jammal 2008). There were 37 universities in GCC in 2002 which increased to 62 in 2007 (Tripathi and Mukerji 2008). This growth was achieved mainly through private and foreign universities. In addition to regular universities, existence and growth of colleges and specialized institutions has also helped to expand the higher education network in GCC (Tripathi and Mukerji 2008).

Countries in GCC are setting up special education zones to promote higher education of professional nature (Mukerji and Jammal 2008). A prominent example is of Knowledge Village in Dubai, UAE, where campuses of foreign universities can be set up without meeting UAE licensing and accreditation requirements (AEI 2006). Private higher education institutes have grown with the government support as the GCC governments view private higher education institutes as a source of quality improvement and the governments on their own are not capable of setting up an infrastructure which can accommodate the increasing school output (Coffman 2005). Increasing school output is the direct result of earlier focus of GCC governments on providing basic school education to nationals. Significant present and anticipated growth of private higher education institutes in GCC creates a large pool of higher education employees whose work-life balance issues will be of higher interest.

GCC governments are in the process of reviewing the quality of education of private higher education institutes through their ministry of higher education and accreditation councils. Though growth of private higher education has been exponential in GCC countries, yet issues

related to quality planning, control and improvement have not been matching with the growth. Review of classroom teaching and contribution of individual teacher in developing the knowledge base of students are two important issues which have still not been properly addressed. Higher education ministry and accreditation councils need to look beyond the quality assurance documents and address the grass root level issues related to classroom teaching and develop measures to analyse the impact of classroom teaching and its contribution in knowledge expansion of students.

3. Expatriate students and growth of higher education in GCC

A large percentage of GCC population is expatriates and expatriates in general are temporary workers. Majority of expatriates have lived in GCC for a long-term and their children have been educated in the secondary schools in GCC. Now these students are seeking tertiary education and as the public universities cater only to the nationals, these expatriate children are applying for admission in large numbers in private universities in GCC (Coffman 2003). Thus private higher education institutes cater to two distinctive groups of students. One is of locals and another is of expatriate students. Both these groups have a dissimilar social and educational background and to cater to higher education of such distinctive groups through common set of educational programmes is challenging. Private higher education institutes in GCC countries need to develop highly localised curriculum which can accommodate the needs of expatriate students as well as local students.

4. Expatriate academicians and private higher education in GCC

Private higher education institutes in GCC countries rely on expatriate academicians for specialized and professional courses (Mukerji and Jammal 2008). It is worth noting that majority of teachers in private higher education institutes are expatriates. As a long-term strategy, private higher education institutes will need to develop a fertile ground for identification, training and development of locals for inclusion in their faculty positions. As an immediate and medium term strategy private higher education institutes will need to provide better compensation and other facilities to enable them to become an employee of choice for expatriate teachers. This will also help in GCC countries becoming an attractive destination for academicians.

5. Slow growth in salary in education sector in GCC

Market research reports by two prominent GCC based human resource consultancies (Bayt, 2007; Gulf Talent, 2008) highlighted that though salaries have been increasing in the GCC, yet salary increase in education sector was not significant. Bayt (2007) findings suggest that average annual growth in compensation in GCC was 15 percent in 2007. For education sector it was relatively lower at 12.57 percent where as banking and information technology sectors registered salary increase of 19.5 per cent and 18.01 per cent respectively. Similarly, Gulf Talent (2008) reported that though average increase in salary in GCC in 2008 was 11.4 per cent, in education sector it was relatively much lower at 7.8 per.

6. Poor research on higher education in Arab countries

Limited information is available on expatriate academicians; expatriate administrator and recruiters in colleges and universities (Richardson and McKenna 2003). As such there is a need for research on expatriate teachers in higher education. Though private higher education has been expanding in the Arab world, yet research on private higher education has been limited in the region (Al-Lamki 2006). This furthers the demand of local research in private higher education.

7. Common drawbacks of private higher education institutes

Altbach (2005) presented an exhaustive list of limitations and drawbacks of private higher education institutes. Reliance on part-time teachers, poor qualifications of teachers, poor commitment of teachers, poor curriculum development, poor faculty governance, poor focus on research and lack of rewards for research are some of the limitations presented by Altbach (2005). Further, Altbach (2005) also states that with reference to foreign private higher education institutions curricula from parent country is not necessarily sufficient for the host country and variation of teaching and learning across cultures are not addressed by foreign private higher education institutes.

8. Discussion

For expanding the higher education infrastructure, governments of GCC countries have focussed their attention on private higher education institutes. In such circumstances private institutes have an enlarged responsibility in contributing towards the higher education environment in GCC countries. Private higher education institutes need to commit larger amounts of financial investment in rapidly expanding the infrastructure so as cater to a larger student base. In addition, private higher education institutes need to develop their own internal quality improvement programmes which should look beyond the statutory requirements of quality assurance documentation.

Curriculum of private higher education institutes needs to be regularly reviewed and updated and should be flexible enough to cater to the distinctive students groups of locals and expatriates. Enhanced interaction with local employers in different business fields is required to assess the relevance of present curriculum and if needed, depending on the inputs from the local corporate world, curriculum revision plans should be initiated. To attract better quality of expatriate teaching faculty better compensation plans directly linked with local inflation rates should be devised. Further, career development and mentoring programmes should be initiated to attract younger expatriate teaching staff.

Private higher education institutes need to promote research and development facilities at institutional level. In addition, private higher education institutes need to themselves engage in research on higher education in order to find better alternatives for further growth and development of higher education in GCC countries. Governments in GCC countries need to provide higher level of support to private higher education by funding their research and development activities.

9. Conclusion

It is expected that private higher education institutes will continue to grow and expand in GCC countries. Private higher education institutes in GCC countries, with their tie-up's with different international universities provide a diverse education base. But due to this diversity, some problems related to inconsistency in education may also arise. To address these issues private higher education institutes, in partnership with GCC governments, need to

continuously review and address key issues such as infrastructure development, curriculum development and faculty development on the basis of common policies and standards. Further research is imperative to develop a common higher education curriculum across different private higher education institutes. Further research is also needed to appraise the needs of local employees and to then match degree programmes accordingly.

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